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## **Title: Student Capital: The role of students in city transformation**

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*Keywords:* Future university Green Capital, Student-city partnership, student engagement, university and Students' Union partnerships

*Short summary: (currently 249 words, 250 allowed)*

Bristol has a university student population of approximately 50,000 – comprising over 10% of the population of the entire city! This represents an enormous potential, and in 2015 the Student Capital project mobilised the student community to tackle the challenging sustainability issues facing our city, our society, and our planet.

Many of the sustainability issues which we face require action at the community level. HE institutions are most often well connected within their area – they have good links with local organisations and many of their staff and students live and work as part of the community. Therefore, HEIs are well placed to engage with local communities, and can connect students with organisations through a number of pathways, for example: volunteering opportunities, placements, internships, or projects. The University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE) and the University of Bristol – with their respective Students' Unions – have been working in partnership with the city and local communities, using HEFCE Catalyst funding to promote student involvement in Green Capital activities across Greater Bristol.

Student Capital created a broad programme of citywide impact during Green Capital. The project has changed Bristol's view of student engagement, making students highly visible sustainability change agents in and around the city. The 3,500+ students engaged by Student Capital have given an incredible 137,649 hours of their time and effort, equal to 80.9 years' worth of work and adding £1.3 million to the city's economy, and the project's legacy activities will ensure that this work continues into the future.

*Text (currently 1496 words, 1500 allowed)*

Bristol has a university student population of approximately 50,000 – comprising over 10% of the population of the entire city! This paper reports on a project to transform the engagement of students with the city, supported by a HEFCE Strategic Catalyst Fund Grant. The aim of the project was to mobilise the student community to tackle the challenging sustainability issues facing the city, using an action research approach to develop methodologies for doing so which could inform development elsewhere. The aim was to use Green Capital status to develop and catalyse the project, but then to maintain a legacy by continuing the work in future years.

The biggest sustainability impact of any University is its graduates. The project started by posing two questions: *How do we support students to tread more lightly in the lifetime ahead of them? How can we mobilise the creativity of students to transform us, and our city?* The project had a dual-aim. First, we wanted to enable our students to experience the transformative power of being engaged citizens: to realise that sustainability is not just about theory, it is about how we live our lives, how we engage with others and how we create new opportunities for ourselves and others. Second, we wanted to demonstrate that students are a huge resource for cities and regions. We adopted the four step approach developed by Walsh *et al.* "Learn, Act, Engage, Create".

Bristol has a record of being innovative and radical, with a vision of an inclusive, sustainable city. Green Capital status was seen not as a reward, but as an opportunity to take the city forward. Students can often be problematized, in terms of economic distortions to house prices and the night time economy, and in terms of their role as generators of nuisance. Councils and others external to universities seldom seek to engage them strategically, as they are seen as transient residents. However, a core part of this work is a recognition that whilst the individual students do change, there is *always* about 10% of the population who are students, with energy and time available; Universities and Students' Unions have access to those residents in a manner that is in contrast to access to other citizens. Far from being a problem, they are a unique asset.

The two public Universities in Bristol – University of Bristol (UOB) and the University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE) joined forces with their two Students' Unions to develop a project to deliver 100,000 hours of student engagement across the public, private, civic, and voluntary sectors in Green Capital year – and every year thereafter. The partnership was large-scale, involving the whole of both institutions at the strategic level, and their Unions. It worked with the City Council and Mayor, and Bristol Green Capital partnership (BGCP). The BGCP is a network grouping of over 850 organisations across the city: public, private, civic, and community. They are large and small, linked by a commitment to trying to make the city more sustainable. That partnership provided the project with unrivalled access to a group of organisations that had already identified themselves as committed to improving the sustainability of the city in some way.

Through this pledge to deliver 100,000 hours of student action for sustainability in 2015, the project sought to *change attitudes* in students and the city. Delivery involved a range of volunteering, internships, placements, and projects. It worked with over 220 organisations, on large and small-scale projects; some were collective, some individual. Having built the networks to deliver these, the project also pledged to sustain that level not just in 2015 but every year, through the development of sustainable networks, and in particular through the creation of Skills Bridge<sup>1</sup>, a digital platform for sharing opportunities and presenting case studies of achievement to inspire others to volunteer or to ask for student involvement.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [www.skillsbridge.ac.uk](http://www.skillsbridge.ac.uk).

The project was open, inclusive, and exploratory. It deliberately did not set out to dictate central control. It was developed as an umbrella, so that a host of initiatives could flourish independently, but see themselves as part of a greater whole. Students are often faced with conflicting calls to volunteer – should they join Amnesty, work at the night shelter, or do conservation work? Which is more important? The project sought to establish in student minds that they are equally important, in that they each contribute in their own way to the whole – the 100,000 hours. We saw that as an important feature of encouraging students to live sustainable lives – seeing how their chosen activities contribute to the collegiate good, and work through synergy not competition.

The projects ranged across the whole of sustainability, for example: raising money, assisting community groups, helping in work days, designing and delivering workshops, greening businesses, working sustainable farmland, managing wildlife corridors, and working with NGOs to develop new business plans.

An important feature of the approach is its emphasis upon overall impact. Previous University efforts to engage students in community activity have tended to be based on individual projects, which can be resource intensive to sustain, and when they naturally run their course and peter out this can be perceived as failure. But of course this isn't the case, all projects have a particular life cycle: some might persist for years or decades, whilst some might blossom and fade in a single year or even a matter of months, and yet most will have had a measure of positive impact. By focussing on the big picture, it has proven possible to empower and support activities through their life cycle – the identification of opportunities, the development of relationships, growth, sustaining them and then ultimately their natural end – without this being seen as failure. The aim is to ensure at any one time many different engagements leading to 100,000 hours a year are in place, celebrating the changing role of individual projects within that whole. The strength of this approach was seen when a taught programme was identified where students were doing hypothetical business plans for NGOs. The Project was able to work with BGCP and within days had over 40 local organisations asking if the students could work with them developing and revising real business plans – with benefits to the students and community.

To enable the community and students to celebrate their achievements, the two Universities have developed a new award, the Change Maker Award. This award has two levels, Change Maker, and Change Maker gold. Three public award ceremonies have been held to date, attended by many of the organisations students have worked with, and by civic leaders. Over 700 awards have been made to date. They award holders have to have carried out sufficient hours of community engagement, but also need to have promoted the benefits of engagement to others in line with the four step approach, learn, act, engage and create, in which a crucial part of living a more sustainable life is spreading the word so others have similar opportunities.

The project has proven transformational for individuals, 96% of students felt their involvement had a positive impact, enjoyed it, felt it was worthwhile, and felt useful. Over 2,500 students have taken part in the first year, providing over 135,000 hours of work, worth over £1.3 million to local economy. It is changing student understandings of what it means to live in a city, and also changing our city itself, by, for example, influencing a business's decision to come to Bristol or helping a local NGO develop a new business plan. Furthermore, it has affected attitudes – creating transformation both for the individual and for the group, as one participant organisation commented: *"It has been fantastic to work with the University as well: lots of people in this area don't go to University or have any connections. It has really changed our perceptions"*.

Both Universities have been sufficiently impressed by the outcomes that they have committed to sustaining the project. Central to long term resourcing of it, in particular brokering new opportunities, is the Skills Bridge platform. It provides a single "front of house" for local organisations to engage with universities. People do not necessarily know what universities or their students might do, or how to navigate through the labyrinthine institutional structures. Skills Bridge provides a point of access to students at both Universities. It includes case studies, to both help students identify what they might like to do, and most importantly to encourage local groups to spot the sorts of things students might do for them.

### Conclusion

The project has demonstrated the benefits of large-scale engagement, and has identified key factors in building such a successful approach. Whilst the particular approach was city based, and used Bristol's status as first (and probably last) European Green Capital as a catalyst for the transformation, the work has implications for the potential to engage students on a large scale in other cities and regions, and potentially in any area which has a suitable identity and university community.

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